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AUTHOR Pellegrini, A. D.
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ABSTRACT

The process by which preschoolers generate cohesive oral text was investigated in two fields of discourse: social dramatic and constructive play. Four preschoolers, 2 boys and 2 girls, ranging in age from 51 to 60 months were observed and videotaped in their regular preschool classroom on 2 successive days during free play periods. Each child was observed for 2 fifteen-minute sessions: one social dramatic play episode and one constructive play episode. All social dramatic play took place in the center's housekeeping corner. Constructive play took place in the block corner. Utterances were transcribed verbatum, noting speakers' turns and contextual variables. Utterances were coded according to Halliday and Hasan's (1976) model of cohesion. It was found that the building of cohesive text in both play contexts was dependent upon the topic introductory utterance, the utterance which marks the beginning of a new play topic and, consequently, new text. In both contexts the predominant strategy used by children to introduce a topic was to repeat introductory utterances and key lexical elements related to the introduction. Clarification strategies were observed in social dramatic play, but not in constructive play. Social dramatic play seemed to rely upon verbally encoded play themes for sustenance. Constructive play themes were based on children jointly manipulating objects. (Author/SS)

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The generation of cohesive text by preschoolers in two play contexts

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A.D. Pellegrini
Assistant Professor of Education
University of Georgia
Athens, GA 30602

404-542-4244

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Abstract

The generation of cohesive text by preschoolers
in two play contexts

A.D. Pellegrini, University of Georgia

The intent of this study was to determine the process by which preschoolers generate cohesive oral text (Halliday & Hasan, 1976), in two fields of discourse: social dramatic and constructive play.

Four preschoolers, two boys and two girls ranging in age from 51 to 60 months, were videotaped in their preschool classrooms during two fifteen minute free play periods. It was found that the building of cohesive text in both play contexts was dependent upon the topic introductory utterance, the utterance which marks the beginning of a new play topic and consequently new text. In both contexts the predominant strategy used by children to introduce a topic was to repeat introductory utterances and key lexical elements related to the introduction.

Interlocutors in the social dramatic play episodes often repeated the topic initiator's introduction and asked Wh and Yes/No questions when they thought the topic needed further clarification. Topic initiators, in turn, clarified their introductions by rewording the introduction or by answering Wh or Yes/No questions. Such clarification strategies were not observed in constructive play.

Entire social dramatic play episodes were found to be mediated by topic introductory utterances. That is, the play themes that were defined in the introductions were referred to anaphorically and cataphorically throughout the text. Social dramatic play seemed to rely upon verbally encoded play themes for sustenance.

Constructive play themes were based on children jointly manipulating objects. Players did not verbally encode themes because objects were clearly visible to all involved. The large number of exophoric references

(21% of utterances) illustrates the point. Play in this context was less dependent on cohesive text for sustenance.

Pedagogical implications of different play contexts and the ability to construct cohesive text are discussed.

The Creation of Text

For a number of years scholars have investigated the relationships between children's linguistic capabilitites and school success. Such efforts have ranged from vocabulary studies (Dunn, 1965), through the study of usage on the single sentence level (Berieter & Englemann, 1962), to the multi-sentence studies of discourse analysis (Sinclair & Coulthard, 1975). Those interested in children's vocabulary, for example, cite research which shows vocabulary test scores as strong predictors of school success (Kagan & Moss, 1962). Researchers examining children's discourse processes hypothesize that the competencies (reading and writing) necessary for success in school and, more generally, for success in a literate society, are based on children's ability to comprehend and construct oral and written text (Olson, 1977). The present study belongs to the latter category. We will examine the processes by which preschool children introduce and construct oral text in two settings, social dramatic play and constructive play, within a preschool classroom. The importance of such a study is supported by recent research which shows the creation and comprehension of oral text as necessary conditions for writing (Elsasser & John Steiner, 1977) and reading (Goodman & Goodman, 1977) skills.

Text, as it will be used in this paper, is viewed as a semantic whole which is constructed in a social context by one or more speakers and realized through sentences (Halliday & Hasan, 1976). This model of text has two elements, cohesion and register. In order for text to be cohesive the meaning of the text must be the result of the linguistic inter-dependence of the elements which make it up. That is, one sentence is dependent upon another sentence for meaning. For example:

1. I wonder if Bill's at home.

2. Why don't you call him.

The meaning of him in Sentence 2 is dependent upon the referent Bill in Sentence 1. Each instance of linguistic interdependence within a text is referred to, according to Halliday and Hasan, as a tie. Cohesion is the result of the interpretation between ties (the presupposed and the presupposing) within the text. Types of cohesion include: reference, e.g., he; substitution, e.g., the same; elipse, e.g., Yes; conjunction, e.g., yet; lexical, e.g., a synonym.

Elements which depend on preceeding referents in text for meaning are anaphoric. For example:

3. The car is in good condition.

4. It's only six months old.

Elements which are dependent on succeeding referents in text for meaning are cataphoric. For example:

5. He's a great guy.

6. Yeah, John's number one.

An element whose interpretation depends on context alone, i.e., is not linguistically defined within the discourse, is exophoric. Exophoric referents are not cohesive in that meaning is not the result of interpreting linguistically encoded elements.

Register, the other constituent of text, attempts to explain how the situational variables of discourse are linguistically incorporated into text. Field, mode, and style, or tenor, of discourse constitute the concept of register. Field of discourse is similar to the notion of a speech event, whereby a particular event determines the topic and the style of the discussion, e.g., a newscast, a scientific lecture, a play episode.

Fields of discourse, such as a linguistics paper presentation, have a direct affect on the text's lexicon, e.g., phoneme, deep structure, or on the text's syntax, e.g., the use of the passive voice. These linguistic phenomena could be said to represent a register of linguistics papers. The context (linguistics paper) affects the linguistic composition (lexicon and syntax) of the text.

Mode is represented by the various media of discourse: oral/written, spontaneous/planned, discourse/monologue. The choice of a specific mode is usually determined by the field of the discourse. For example, the field of a T.V. newscast is typically realized through a particular mode: an oral, planned, monologue.

Style, or tenor, of discourse represents the interpersonal relationship between speakers and listeners. A particular field may call for a formal style between interlocutors. For example, in the field of discourse of testifying before a Senate committee, the formality of the proceedings may call for referring to a colleague as Professor Smith, not Fred, as appropriate form. The further affect of a specific field on the tenor of discourse can be illustrated when interlocutors are in a field where they share much knowledge on a topic. The tenor of this type of field tends to be characterized by implicit reference to the common knowledge which makes up the field. For example, two people are at the dinner table and one of them is cutting cake for dessert. The other person says I'll have a big one. One in this context is not ambiguous reference to a piece of cake because both people are consciously attending to the act of serving cake. The shared body of knowledge, cake for dessert, does not need to be explicitly encoded for meaning to be

conveyed in this situation.

Register then, is the linguistic end product of the interactions between the field, mode, and tenor of discourse. Register links variations in context to variations in text.

To summarize, Halliday and Hasan's notion of text is a semantic concept that considers meaning both from within the text, cohesion, and from context, register. In order for a group of utterances to be considered a text they should be internally cohesive and situationally appropriate.

Using Halliday and Hasan's model, we will explore the ways in which the tenors of discourse of preschoolers vary in relationship to two fields of discourse: social dramatic and constructive play. In social dramatic play, as defined by Smilansky (1968), players must meet the following criteria:

a. undertake a make-believe role towards objects, roles, and situations.

b. use verbal interaction with at least one other player to define these make-believe roles.

c. persist at a play episode for at least ten minutes.

Constructive play has children using materials to build or create something (Smilansky, 1968). The specific tenor of discourse being examined here is the process by which children introduce new discourse topics in a particular field and how other children respond to these introductions, or discourse topics (Li & Thompson, 1976). More specifically, the cohesion of text to discourse topic introductions utterances will be examined in each field.

The introduction of a discourse topic is a critical stage in the construction of text (Goodenough & Weiner, 1976; Kennan & Schieffelin, 1976). The child introducing a new topic in a field of discourse must successfully

signal other players that a new topic is being introduced. Secondly in addition to gaining interlocutors' attention, the introducer must make the topic introduction explicit enough to be understood by interlocutors. If topic initiation acts (Mehan, 1979) are not successful on these two points the introduction will not be comprehended by the other players and utterances generated by interlocutors subsequent to the introduction will not be cohesive to the introduction. The attempted introduction of a play theme will have failed.

The extent to which children's discourse topic introductions are capable of eliciting cohesive text should vary according to the field of discourse in which they are generated. For example, the introduction of a discourse topic in a constructive play field should not be dependent on explicit verbal definition of the play theme because the main theme of constructive play tends to revolve around manipulation of objects, not talking about the manipulations. The manipulations and materials themselves are explicit to each player in the field and thus the sustenance of the play theme is not dependent upon a verbal encoding of the manipulations and/or materials. Thus, exophoric references and less cohesive text should be frequently observed in this field.

Social dramatic play, on the other hand, as defined by Smilansky (1968), has children using language to redefine players' roles and props around a fantasy theme. Thus, the social dramatic play field should elicit explicit discourse topic introductions because themes must be verbally defined for other players in the introduction. Consequently, cataphoric and anaphoric reference should be frequently observed.

Construction of text in both play contexts is under the strong influence of the respective fields of discourse. The discourse topic introduction in

a specific play context is the first element of the text to reflect this sensitivity to the field of discourse. Within a text, all utterances generated subsequent to the topic introduction should be cohesive to the introduction if the meaning of text is dependent upon an explicit introduction.

The Study

In the present study four preschoolers, 2 boys and 2 girls, ranging in age from 51 to 60 months were observed in a university preschool. A staff member of the center observed and videotaped the children in their regular preschool classroom on 2 successive days during free play periods. Because of the children's familiarity with videotape equipment and with the staff member doing the taping, the observations were thought to be unobtrusive. Each child was observed for 2 fifteen minute sessions: one social dramatic play episode and one constructive play episode. All social dramatic play took place in the center's housekeeping corner. Constructive play took place in the block corner. Utterances were transcribed verbatum, noting speakers' turns and contextual variables. Utterances were coded according to Halliday and Hasan's (1976) model of cohesion.

Children attempting to introduce discourse topics used a similar attention eliciting strategy in both constructive and social dramatic play fields. In both fields the children tended to repeat their topic introductions to elicit auditors' attention. In social dramatic play 50% of the utterances introducing new topics were repetitions whereas 40% of the introductory utterances were repetitions in constructive play. In social dramatic play auditors responding to these introductions tended to repeat the reiterated introductory utterances: in 75% of the cases where the introductory utterances were repeated by the child introducing a new social dramatic play topic,

the auditors, in turn repeated the same utterance. This phenomenon was not observed in constructive play.

The repetition of the topic introductory utterance by children initiating a play episode was probably an attempt to alert auditors to the emergence of a new topic; an attention getting device. This is a necessary first step in building cohesive text between interlocutors. Schegloff (1968) has observed adults using repetition to direct auditors attention to topic introductions. Repetition of introductions seem to function as reminders to auditors that they have a "pragmatic duty" (Keenan & Klein, 1975) to respond to topic introductory utterances.

Auditors in the social dramatic play context responding to introductions with repetitions recognize their obligation to respond with cohesive utterances (Schegloff, 1968) in discourse settings. Their repetitions of introductions fulfill this obligation, or pragmatic duty, in a situationally appropriate and linguistically cohesive manner.

Other researchers (Slama-Cazacu, 1977; Nelson & Gruendel, 1979) have also observed young children responding to discourse introductions with repetitions. They hypothesize that this strategy shows auditors' willingness to maintain the introduced theme as a topic for the discourse. Repetition by auditors in this study, however, marked their need for clarification of the social dramatic play topic being introduced. When auditors in this field repeated introductions the child introducing the topic always responded by clarifying the introduction. For example, a child repeated The red one. I want the red one, in an effort to initiate a new play theme involving a red hat. An auditor repeated The red one? in question form, marking the need for clarification of The red one. The introducer then clarified the introduction: The red one. There's only one over there (as he pointed to the

pile of hats in the dress up corner).

Besides repeating topic introductions to mark the need for clarification, auditors also posed Wh and Yes/No questions to get introducers to be more explicit. In one session two children were talking to each other on telephones and one child introduced the theme of ordering a pizza: Three, make that two. OK make that seven. The auditor did not comprehend the theme, i.e., seven of what, so he used a Wh question for clarification: What do you want? The introducer then clarified the theme by stating that he wanted pizzas: We'll have pepperoni and cheese pizzas.

In the present study, repetition of topic introductory utterances were not only used to gain interlocutors' attention, they were also used by auditors to ask for clarification of upcoming play themes. Children in both constructive play and social dramatic play relied upon repetition to gain interlocutors' attention. However, only in social dramatic play did auditors frequently use reiteration and questions to get introducers to clarify play themes. It is hypothesized that the reason for this strategy maybe due to the specific demands of each field of discourse. The social dramatic play field calls for a style of discourse characterized by explicit introductions and clarification of topics where introductions are ambiguous. Social dramatic play, according to Smilansky (1968), is dependent upon players' verbally defining the play episodes in that these play situations are, by definition, fantastic and assign novel uses and roles to props and players. For example, a child initiated a social dramatic play episode in the housekeeping corner by defining the play episode: I want these because its Mommy's birthday. The interlocutor repeated, the key theme word, Birthday and marked her comprehension of the theme with Alright. The success or failure of the theme was dependent upon the auditor comprehending the introductory utterance which defined the upcoming play

episode as a birthday party. The introduction, which clearly set the theme for the upcoming play episode, resulted in the successful introduction and sustenance of the play theme.

In constructive play, on the other hand, manipulation, not a verbally defined topic, is the theme of each episode. This being the case, repetition of discourse topics by children introducing themes seems to have been used only to get auditors' attention. Auditors consequently did not request clarification of the topics. The play theme was defined through manipulation, not by a verbally encoded play theme. The reliance on manipulation, as opposed to cohesive text, to sustain constructive play episodes is further supported by the observation that 21% of the utterances in this field contained exophoric references whereas only 9% of the utterances in social dramatic play field contained exophoric references. Players in constructive play often relied on contextual variables to transmit meaning in play episodes.

The cohesive power of discourse topic introductory utterances in social dramatic play often provided the reference point around which whole texts were constructed. Topic introductory utterances were typically tied to anophoric referents throughout the whole text. The introductions provided the theme for the whole play episode text; introductions mediated the meaning of the whole text. For example, two girls engaged in a social dramatic play episode of playing truck drivers used the first four lines of their play episode to explicitly allocate roles for the up-coming discourse: Hi; Hi; My name's Joe; My name's Randy. After these introductory utterances Joe and Randy were referred to as him and he, thus creating cohesive ties through anaphoric reference. The girls continued this truck driver theme until they were interrupted by another child. The interruption consisted of ten utterances being exchanged between the two girls and the one interloper.

After the interruption subsided the girls resumed their truck driver theme through a tie back to the original topic introductory utterance: Now, Joe junked his truck. Joe was only mentioned to originally introduce the topic and later, after the interruption, to reintroduce the topic. Joe, in the reintroduction, served as a tie back to the original role allocation utterances. Mention of Joe was enough to reintroduce the original play theme, despite the interruption of ten utterances. The topic introductory utterance and the specific lexical element, Joe, was the element around which the text was constructed initially and again subsequent to the interruption. The text of this play episode was mediated, generally, by the introductory utterances and specifically by the role allocation in the introduction.

Cataphoric reference was also used to make topic introductions more explicit, elements were defined subsequent to their introduction. Halliday and Hasan (1976) report that young children sometime employ cataphoric reference to introduce narratives because it has the effect of making topics more explicit. From our corpora of utterances we found a young girl using cataphoric reference in the introduction of a fantasy theme in the housekeeping corner. She held up her soapy hands from the dishwashing pan and said: Look what I'm makin to mark the beginning of the episode. In the next utterance, I'm makin ice cream, she defined the what of the first utterance as ice cream; the role of the suds as ice cream was being explicitly defined for other players through cataphoric reference. If this play episode was to be successfully introduced, the explicit re-definition of suds as ice cream was necessary to make clear the play theme to all players. The introduction was successful because the other players continued to construct the text around the introduction: ice cream was anaphorically referred to as

this (near demonstrative reference); this was subsequently referred to anaphorically as that (far demonstrative reference), and later as it (pronominal). The text was cohesively constructed through explicit introductory utterances (cataphorically referred to) and ten subsequent utterances directly tied to these explicit topic statements. Topic statements in social dramatic play then, mediate the meaning of whole texts through cataphoric and anaphoric reference.

In social dramatic play, introductory utterances must be explicit in that conventions for roles, and prop definition need to be clearly defined for all players if play is to be sustained. Play is sustained only because interlocutors are able to correctly infer these roles and conventions (Griffin & Mehan, 1979). The role assignments and prop definitions cannot be conveyed without explicit verbal definition because they are abstract: objects' conventional appearance/function do not relate to their meaning in the social dramatic play episodes. One therefore cannot rely directly on an object to convey meaning in play. After the conventions for the episode are initially established there is less reliance on their being explicitly encoded. Subsequent utterances are dependent on the introduction for meaning.

The intent of this paper has been to explore the cohesive powers of topic introductory utterances. It has been shown that introductory utterances serve an attention getting function in both constructive play and social dramatic play. In social dramatic play, however, an explicit introductory utterance is the referent around which the rest of the text coheres.

Preschoolers ability to generate cohesive text in social dramatic play contexts has implications for early childhood pedagogy. The pedagogical importance relates directly to one of the primary functions of early childhood education:

> (T)he school experience requires the child to attend to interpreting overtly lexicalized intensions rather than to rely on situated information; and the child must learn how to lexicalize the assumptions which are specific to the particular interactional setting and novel to the participants (Cook-Gumperz, p. 109).

In other words, a goal of schooling is for children to learn to explicitly encode their ideas into language and to be less dependent on contextual assumptions to convey meaning.

The social dramatic play context required children to convey meaning through explicit oral language in order to introduce and sustain play episodes. It was noted in this study that children's explicit topic introductory utterances in social dramatic play episodes served the purpose of defining the play theme. The extent to which lexical elements from the introduction were subsequently referred to anaphorically by players demonstrated how introductions mediated meaning for the whole text. When more explicit reference was required cataphoric reference was employed. Explicit introductions were necessary to elicit other players' responses in social dramatic play because the theme of such episodes were not always obvious; players assigned novel roles to props and players. Thus, the context of social dramatic play itself calls for children to use explicit language if play is to be sustained. Unlike constructive play, which has children's language more reliant on contextual assumptions, the sustenance of social dramatic play is dependent upon players' explicit verbal encoding of play themes and roles.

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